Nixon, Aides Believe Hearing Is Witchhunt

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President Nixon and his top aides believe that the Senate Watergate hearings are unfair and constitute a "political witchhunt," according to White House sources.

Despite apparent bipartisan and public support for the hearings and the manner in which they are being conducted, the sources said that the President in the last weeks has expressed bitterness and deep hostility toward the two-month-old proceedings.

"The President," one source said, "sees the hearings as an attempt to get Richard Nixon and do it just damn unfairly." According to four separate sources, the hostility toward the hearings is also pervasive among the White House staff, especially by former assistants to H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, the deposed former top presidential aides.

One White House source said he saw the struggle with the Senate Watergate Committee, as not just politics but a battle for survival. "The Ervin Committee is out to destroy the President," he said.

The bitterness, according to the sources, extends to the point where some White House aides openly mock the members of the Senate committee. In a reference to Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.), the committee chairman, one White House aide put on a Southern accent and told a reporter:

"I just little ole country bumpkin Sam and this nasty politics offends my pea-pick-

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ing heart." The aide, who holds a middle-level position in the White House, then dropped the Southern accent and said that "Senator Ervin is out to slice the President and it offends me to see him come on so sweet when he isn't."

Another high White House aide said that Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), the committee vice chairman, "has effectively deserted the President and the resentment runs high over here.

Five Whie House aides agreed to discuss the individual members of the Watergate committee, and all said they found Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.), an outspoken critic of the White House, the most offensive. In several outbursts of moral indignation, Weicker has denounced the political espionage, dirty tricks, cover up and deception which come under the heading of Watergate.

One Whte House source said that the President himself has denounced Weicker with an unflattering obscenity.

Two of the sources also criticized Sen. Edward J. Gurney (R-Fla.), who is the strongest defender of the President. "Gurney is doing the only decent job of questioning," one source said, "but he is not pushing enough."

All the sources asked to remain unidentified. Several of them said that Leonard Garment and J. Fred Buzhardt, the White House attorneys representing the President on the Watergate, generally represent a so-called soft-line of cooperating with the Senate Watergate committee.

One of the advocates of a hard-line in the Whte House said: "This is not a legal struggle as Garment and Buzhardt see it — instead it is a political struggle and we must counterattack politically and in the media."

The sources generally agreed that there is a cloud of gloom around the White House that must be eliminated. Avenues of possible counterattack, the sources said, could be to:

- Charge that the Senate committee is blowing the Watergate out of proportion and diverting too much governmental attention to it, keeping the President from solving more important problems such as those of the economy.
- Blame the Watergate committee for "McCarthyism" —hearing unsupported charges and creating an atmosphere in which the latest polls show that 35 per cent of the people believe the President had knowledge of the Watergate bugging prior to the June 17, 1972, break-in, though there has never been such an allegation by any witness.
- Charge the news media with bias and sensationalizing of all Watergate allegations, including the televising of former presidential counsel John W. Dean's allegations against the President by all three television networks while the Senate committee witnesses who defend the President are broadcast on only one network.
- Release a detailed defense on the expenditure of $1.3 million for the President's homes in San Clemente, Calif., and Key Biscayne, Fla., showing that the money was spent for legitimate security measures. (There is a feeling in the White House that the issue was badly handled by the General Services Administration, which released the figures.)

Though some White House aides do not feel a counterattack should be mounted, the sources said nearly all aides feel that there is no reason the President should appear chastened by the Watergate.

"As the bitterness runs high," one source said, "there is little receptivity to the lessons of Watergate that we might learn."